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ABSTRACT

A study on visual literacy in children explored such questions as: (1) how a visual literacy curriculum might be structured; and (2) whether, when students participate in a visual literacy program, they consequently say or write more, and whether what they have to say is more insightful. During the experiences, children talked and wrote about pictures in books after being introduced to such visual elements as line, shape, color, texture, form, and space. Results reported are based on data from 15 fifth grade children from each of two classrooms, one suburban and one urban. Subjects were five children each in high, medium and low language groups. Students were asked to apply some of what they were learning about visual elements to a very concrete task: choosing a Caldecott winner and giving reasons for their choices. To analyze the data reported, three different language measures were used, two quantity measures and one quality measure. Results indicated the number of words generated in both lessons was about the same. In each lesson, the urban children generated more words than did the suburban children. When the categories of comments are further grouped into those relating specifically to pictures, and those related to factors other than the pictures, it was clear that children in these two groups had become able to talk about visual reasons for preferring one book over another. (Eight tables of data are included.) (MG)

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Choosing the Caldecott Winner:
Fifth Graders Give Their Reasons
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Little is known about how children respond to direct instruction in visual literacy. Many researchers have studied visual literacy, the ability to receive, process, relate to past experiences, and respond to the pictures one sees. Most of this research has been done by psychologists working in experimental settings and the results of this work has not had widespread effect on schools (Houghton & Williams, 1987).

Recently school art education programs have moved away from their nearly exclusive emphasis on making art, into programs which include a visual literacy component (Duke, 1985).

However, there are few programs in libraries or in general elementary classrooms designed to teach children to perceive pictures with more awareness. Stewig (in press) has described briefly one approach to using picture books and Lacy (1986) has made similar suggestions using Caldecott books. Nonetheless, because there are so few sequential visual literacy programs, most children's response to pictures remains on a level of identification of contents.

The research reported here is one small part of a larger experiment with visual literacy. A general description of the entire project may help you understand where this particular piece fits.

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The research was designed to begin answering such questions as:

A) How might a visual literacy curriculum be structured?

B) Do children respond differently in quantity or quality as they speak and write about pictures as a result of participating in such a program? That is, when students participate in a visual literacy program, do they consequently say or write more, and is what they have to say more insightful?

Methodology

First and fifth grade children talked and wrote about picture books as well as reproductions from such books. One urban and one suburban classroom at each grade level participated for an entire school year in the program. During the experiences, children talked (oral samples not reported here were taped) and wrote about pictures in the books. Writing samples were gathered periodically, though results from only two sessions are included here.

Results reported are based on data from 15, 5th grade children from each of two classrooms. All children in the rooms participated in each lesson throughout the year. The sample children were chosen before the study began by the classroom teacher who was asked to identify 5 each in high, medium and low language use groups. This way of choosing research subjects is recommended by Dyson (1984). For each of the two sessions reported here, less than the total number of children was present.

During the program children were introduced to such visual elements as line, shape, color, texture, form, and space. Examples from many picture books illustrated various uses of these elements. Then children were given or chose other picture books and asked to identify, describe and respond to the visual elements in the new contexts.

Writing included in this analysis was gathered in January, after we had been working with children for about 18 weeks. In this part of the research, we wanted students to apply some of what they had been learning about visual elements to a very concrete task: choosing a Caldecott winner and giving reasons for their choices. For a first experience in this part of the year-long program, we presented the winners from the previous year (without identifying winner, or Honor Book position).¹ Introductory discussion revealed that while a few children had seen one of the books, none knew the award status of either book. Children were asked to examine them carefully, before writing a statement describing the reason for their choice.

To analyze the data reported here, three different language measures were used; two of these are quantity measures while one is a quality measure. We tallied the number of sentences generated, and the total number of words generated. These two quantity measures are often used as rough estimates of language maturity (Loban, 1976).

The quality measure, a type/token ratio, is often used by language researchers (according to Jensen, 1973) as an indication of language maturity. This reports the number of different words (called types) per given sample (called tokens). The researcher chooses the number of tokens to be used (in this case, 50 words) and then notes every repeated word. What is left is the type-token ratio, an indication of language diversity. For example, 25/50 is a less diverse sample than 36/50. The ratio is often presented as a percentage, as in the tables here. Analysis of the language generated showed the following:

<u>Suburban School</u>	<u>Low</u>	<u>High</u>
Number of sentences	1	5
Number of Words	15	58
Type-Token Ratio (50 words min.)	35/50, 70%	47/50, 95%

<u>Urban School</u>	<u>Low</u>	<u>High</u>
Number of Sentences	1	8
Number of Words	31	110
Type-Token Ratio (50 words min.)	28/50, 56%	43/50, 86%

In the suburban school, five of the children chose Duckling while nine chose Dragon. An analysis of the types of reasons children gave for their choices showed the following:

Category	Comments
1. amount of detail in pictures	4
2. general evaluative term (i.e., "excellent" with no specific given)	3
3. interesting story	2
4. audience (i.e., "enjoyed by all ages")	1
5. color	1
6. ending	1
7. affective (i.e., "story makes me feel better")	1
8. tone (i.e., "it has a mystique")	1

In the urban school, nine children chose Duckling while four chose Dragon. An analysis of paragraphs the children wrote showed the following array of reasons:

Category	Comments
1. color	7
2. plot	5
3. general evaluative	4
4. amount of details	4
5. reminded of something else (i.e., another book; an old movie; activity with pet; activity with family)	4
6. few words	3
7. audience (i.e., "little kids would like it")	3

In addition, there were single responses concerned with feelings (i.e., "first it made me feel sad, then happy at the end"), genre ("it's like a fairy tale"), process ("it took a lot of time to make those pictures"), layout ("there are different size pictures"), texture, realism, and nature of the background.

Having familiarized children with the procedure we wanted to use, we moved the following week into a consideration of the current year's Caldecott winner and Honor Book.² The announcement of the awards had been made two weeks before by the American Library Association, but the classroom teachers reported that neither class was familiar with the winners. The procedure followed was the same as described above.

Language

The paragraphs written by the children were analyzed using the same three language measures used throughout the study and revealed the following:

<u>Suburban School</u>	<u>Low</u>	<u>High</u>
Number of sentences	1	5
Number of Words	11	63
Type-Token Ratio (50 words min.)	29/50, 58%	36/50, 72%
<u>Urban School</u>	<u>Low</u>	<u>High</u>
Number of Sentences	1	10
Number of Words	34	142
Type-Token Ratio (50 words min.)	28/50, 56%	36/50, 72%

In this lesson also, the urban children wrote more than did the suburban children. This is similar to findings reported elsewhere about language stimulated by both award-winning and non-award winning books, gathered at 3 other times during the school year (Stewig, 1988b).

Choices and Reasons

In the suburban school, twelve children chose Mufaro while no children chose Dwl. An analysis of paragraphs the children wrote showed the following array of reasons:

Category	Comments
1. general evaluative (no specific given, beyond such terms as "excellent")	8
2. color ("they matched")	7
3. amount of detail	4
4. didactic plot ("it taught a lesson")	3
5. compared to other book ("pictures in the other book keep repeating themselves")	3
6. tone ("peaceful")	2
7. crosshatching	2
8. more realistic	1
9. texture	1
10. genre ("it was like a fairyland, instead of like real Africa")	1

In the urban school, twelve children chose Mufaro while no children chose Owl. An analysis of paragraphs the children wrote showed the following array of reasons:

Category	Comments
1. color ("varying shades")	7
2. realism ("When you read this, it shows pictures like things are")	6
3. details	5
4. plot ("It has magic moments")	5
5. didactic plot	3
6. crosshatching	3
7. general evaluative	2
8. reminded of something else	2
9. compared to other book	1

Conclusions

When we look at the three language measures used, some interesting conclusions are apparent. The number of sentences generated in both lessons is about the same. The number of words varies depending on the lesson. When we consider the top end of the range in number of words generated, we find that both suburban and urban children generated more words during the second lesson. In each lesson, the urban children generated more words than did the

suburban children. When studying results of the type/token ratio (a measure of diversity), we note two interesting details. In both lessons, the high end of the range was comparable among urban and suburban students. In the low end of the diversity range, suburban pupils outscored urban ones. The suburban children wrote less diverse language in the second lesson. Looking at the urban children's language, though the low end was identical in the second lesson, the high end was considerably lower than in the first lesson. The diversity level decreased in the second lesson.

When the categories of comments are further grouped into those relating specifically to pictures, and those related to factors other than the pictures (most frequently comments about various aspects of the text), it is clear that children in these two groups had become able to talk about visual reasons for preferring one book over another. That in itself speaks well for the experimental visual literacy program, since children who have not participated in such a program most typically give preferences based heavily if not exclusively on text or other non-pictorial factors. Despite this, text, or at least non-pictorial reasons continued to be frequently given.

Over-all Summary

Total Number of Comments

	Visual	Text, or other non-pictorial
Suburban	24	12
Urban	39	25

There were more comments made about visuals in the urban group, which is understandable since that group generated more language than did the suburban group. (Also true in Stewig, 1988.)

This paper reports some base-line data gathered as one part of a year long study of the development of visual literacy. The writing urban and suburban children in this study produced about the pictures in books varied in quantity and quality. The data reported here, and elsewhere should make it possible for other researchers to design more sophisticated studies of the ways in which visual literacy curricula can be designed and presented to children, to increase children's ability to look at and respond to pictures.

Footnotes

¹Caldecott: St. George and the Dragon retold by Margaret Hodges and illustrated by Trina Schart Hyman (Little, Brown). Honor Book: Have You Seen My Duckling? by Nancy Tafuri (Greenwillow).

²Caldecott: Owl Moon by Jane Yolen and illustrated by John Schoenherr (Philomel Books). Honor Book: Mufaro's Beautiful Daughter by John Steptoe (Lothrop).

³A Type-Token ratio is a quality measure which provides information on language diversity. It reports the number of different words (types) per given sample (tokens). The researcher chooses the number of tokens to be used and then notes every repeated word. What is left is a type/token ratio. For example 25/50 is less diverse language than is 38/50. The ratio is often presented, as it is here, in percentage form.

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